

The Socialist Party exposes Mr Chamberlain and his Labour Critics (1938)

So the crisis is over. Representatives of the four major European Powers sat round the table and concluded arrangements that carve up Czechoslovakia, freeze Russia out of Europe, and, we are fervently assured, lay the basis of “peace in our time”. Lest there should be any doubt about this peaceful future, a great drive to develop armaments is proposed, and plans are being made to ensure that everybody will have a niche in defensive and offensive operations. The temporary popularity of Chamberlain, the general relief at the banishing of immediate war danger, and the united support worked up on behalf of the Czechs, are being utilised to push forward the increased armament campaign.

On September 30th hysterical crowds went wild with joy and hero-worship. War had been averted, and it was believed that Chamberlain was the man who accomplished that deed. His smiling face appeared on placards, in newspapers, and on the moving-picture screen. His wife shared in his fame, and crowds fought to shake her hand. For a while he was the most popular man in England. Yet the strange part of it is that Chamberlain’s fame is based on the circumstance that apparently his plans nearly went entirely wrong; raised the spectre of war, and eventually brought the Munich instead of the Godesberg Agreement. The British Government have been landed in a position in European affairs that was not expected by them. So far Hitler and not Chamberlain has gained most out of the diplomatic manoeuvres of months past.

What were the real facts of the situation? On what does Chamberlain’s claim to fame rest?

The immediate source of Chamberlain’s popularity is not hard to find. For a few days modern war, with its horrors, weighed like a black cloud on the minds of everybody. The subsequent relief on hearing the message of peace released an uncritical joy that deified the messenger.

What part has Chamberlain really played in this dangerous business?

For a long time the capitalist government of this country has been split into different camps over foreign policy. The reasons for this are too long to go into here. It is sufficient to say that they are partly economic differences and partly differences of view as to what best serves the general capitalist interest. One group favours “minding our own business” and leaving other nations to mind theirs; another group urges a better understanding with Russia and the resisting of the imperialist policies of Germany and Italy; a third group presses for a general pact between England, Germany, France and Italy, and the shutting out of Russia from any influence on European affairs.

The third policy is the one that has been urged by the Chamberlains and their supporters for some time past. It was given expression to by Chamberlain on the eve of the Munich meeting when, in his Parliamentary statement, he criticised the provisions of the Versailles Peace Treaty.

Even while a member of the Baldwin Government, which had taken half-hearted measures to resist Italy’s policy in Abyssinia, Chamberlain made clear his disagreements on foreign policy. Sir Charles Petrie, an admirer of Chamberlain, describes the circumstances of the public statement in 1936 and, at the same time, made plain the nature of the support behind Chamberlain. He describes the incident as follows:

“Mr Chamberlain stepped into the breach. On the 10th June he was the guest of honour at the annual dinner of the 1900 Club, and he took the opportunity to declare against the continuance of Sanctions. The effect was tremendous. An audience which represented the wealth and power of Great Britain cheered the Chancellor to the echo” (*The Chamberlain Tradition*, page 249).

Since Chamberlain became head of the Government, foreign policy has changed its direction. The efforts of Government diplomacy have been turned towards finding a basis of agreement with Germany and Italy and the weaning of France away from its alliance with Russia.

The Munich conference of the four Powers appears to have been a long step towards accomplishing this object, though it occurred under dangerous circumstances, with the threat of war hanging over it. The fact that Czechoslovakian unity was sacrificed in the process was a small matter to the imperialist powers concerned.

The attitude of the Chamberlain group towards Italy's Abyssinian venture and Germany's march on Austria, gave Hitler a hint that further territorial conquests would not be seriously opposed providing these conquests did not interfere with British capitalist interests. When Chamberlain made his first trip to Hitler, on what was wrongly presumed to be an effort to save Czechoslovakian independence, he evidently went with the intention of being a party to the slicing up of that territory. His explanation in Parliament, on the eve of his last visit, makes this clear to those who examine the statement critically.

Taking into consideration the nature of Chamberlain's foreign policy, as briefly outlined, the war situation out of which he "rescued" peace was largely of his own making.

While the Prime Minister was basking in the sunshine of mistaken adulation, one of his supporters pointed out that the real danger that menaces the interests of British capitalists is outside of Europe. On the morrow of the Munich pacts, while Germany was sending emissaries to Turkey and Yugoslavia, to widen its markets and its sources of raw materials, British politicians were heaving sighs of relief and turning to face "the danger again displayed by the Dominions and India, which has not passed unnoticed in Europe".

The last remark is taken from an article in the *Evening Standard* (October 3rd) by Sir Arnold Wilson, who also makes the following significant statement:

"The Parliamentary Opposition parties are representing the redrawing of the map of Europe, now in progress, as a victory for Hitler, which it is, and a defeat for Britain, which it is not".

This is another way of showing that Chamberlain went to Germany prepared to accede to the plans for dismembering Czechoslovakia. And why not? What does it matter to the British capitalist class whether the Czechs are independent or incorporated in Germany? The "National Honour" idea is a myth only invoked when it suits the interests of our rulers to beguile us with it. If Chamberlain, as is claimed, really set out to help Czechoslovakia, then "National Honour" went down on its knees before Hitler along with Chamberlain. Or, as the *Daily Express* (October 3rd) put it more genteelly:

"But this fact must be recognised by all: Britain accepted the Munich Agreement because our defences were not in a condition enabling us to take any other decision".

This plea relating to the defences is being popularised as a means to obtain workers' support for A. R. P. and similar defensive programmes—with all that these things will eventually mean.

One piece of information, relating to the crisis, that has now some significance was published in the *News Review* on July 14th, over two months before the crisis occurred:

"'August, 1914', is a date poignant with memories. What is it that makes Georges Bonnet, France's Foreign Minister, so mysterious about August 1938?
To journalists who discussed the holiday question with him last week, Bonnet's tendered the advice, 'Certainly, take your holidays in August, but don't leave Paris if you can help it'.
Though pressed for an explanation, he refused to say more than that 'there will be a great deal to do,' and that he himself would be at his desk throughout the month".

What was in Bonnet's mind? It could hardly have been war. Was in Godesberg?

The shameless diplomatic methods adopted have misled a number of people into believing that the whole business, including the threat of war, was a fake, deliberately contrived to secure acquiescence in the provisions of the Munich Agreement.

Two writers in the *New Statesman* (October 8th), J. M. Keynes and Robert Dell, make out a plausible case to show that it was a put-up job. That the crisis and the eleventh hour conference, with its solution, had been arranged beforehand. Although there are curious incidents that lend colour to this view, there

are solid objections to it. The risk of war did ultimately enter into the game. Apart from other reasons it is too much to allow that a capitalist government would go into the huge expenses of war preparation, running into over £20 millions, either to lend substance to the shadow or for practice purposes.

The threat of war appeared in the scene because Chamberlain, in shaping his policy, apparently overlooked the fact that Hitler might not be inclined to bargain over territory that he felt strong enough to take if he wished to do so.

One purpose, among many, has been served by the crisis. It has been used as a means for enabling the British and French Governments to recognise officially the Italian conquest of Abyssinia without too much sanctimonious dust being raised about it. Now the way is open for British capitalists to invest freely in Abyssinia and to share with their Italian brothers the wealth squeezed from the Abyssinians.

In this time of stress where did the self-styled leaders of the working class, the Labour and Communist Parties, stand? The answer is easily given. They stood ready, if necessary, to man the guns and shoulder the burden of Empire in the mistaken idea that they were defending democracy against autocracy. Which shows how easy it is to divert movements that are anchored in the shifting sands of mere discontent. Such movements are easily directed into channels that serve the interests of the capitalists. The experience of decades has shown that when the cry “the country is in danger” is raised, the propertyless workers are urged by their leaders to flock to its defence, and to be ready to lay down their lives for a system that does not even guarantee to them the satisfaction of their elementary needs in food and shelter.

Over and over again the workers have been told by the Labour Party and the Communist Party that capitalism is on the down-grade, and that therefore they cannot hope for much improvement in wage conditions. Yet the country has been shown lately to be so wealthy that it could afford to throw away millions of pounds’ worth of goods in defensive measures, when it was believed that war threatened. Under a sensible social system workers would have bread instead of gas-masks.

Now that a great drive for armaments is proposed, the Labour and Communist Parties are logically bound to support it owing to their attitude during the war scare. This fact has been seized upon by all influential newspapers, which point out that the country is united in its desire to build up huge armaments.

Extracts from official sources show clearly the folly and the panic of those who claim to lead the workers.

On September 27th the *Daily Herald* published an article by the Editor, which contained the following statement:

“If there is war, it will be faced with calmness, with resolution, with unshakable courage. All that could be offered to Germany in honour and justice has been offered—far more than that, indeed . . . But if war there must be, since Herr Hitler is set on war, then it is better that it should be now, when Britain has strong allies beside her and to support her, the united opinion of the civilised world, than hereafter, when Germany, by successful aggression has won the mastership of Europe”.

Again, on September 30th, the *Daily Herald* spoke officially:

“In these last days two emotions have sustained the British people. One has been the desire for peace, if peace consistent with honour were possible. The other has been the determination to stand firm, if necessary to the ultimate degree—for the great principles of equity and justice in international affairs by which alone civilisation can flourish”.

International Information (September 12th), a typed sheet issued by the “Labour and Socialist International”, contained this statement:

“Whatever the risks involved, Great Britain must take its stand against aggression. There is now no room for doubt or hesitation”.

The above quotations are sufficient evidence of the Labour Party's readiness to back the Government if war had been declared. The workers should also note also the insistence on "Honour", "Justice" and "Equity", all of which, it was contended, would be flouted if Czechoslovakia were split up. It is another example of the fatuity of the utterances of Labour when one remembers the official view of 18 years ago. In 1920 the Labour Party declared:

"Permission to the predominantly German areas of Czechoslovakia to determine their political future should be granted"—Quoted by the *Evening Standard* (September 16th).

If it were honourable, just and equitable for these areas to determine their political future in 1920, why has it become dishonourable, unjust and inequitable for them to do so now? Above all, why is it necessary that thousands of lives should be sacrificed now for something that was quite proper 18 years ago? The plain fact is that the Labour Party leaders do not know where they are.

The Communist Party is in a like position, and in addition responds blindly to the changing signals from Moscow. On October 3rd the *Daily Worker* published an article by the Editor. The following extracts from it are interesting as a logical interpretation of the Communist Party's demand that Britain should stand firm in opposition to Hitler's designs on Czechoslovakia.

"Had war broken loose on Saturday, as seemed almost certain up till Friday, the corpses of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, would now be strewn the streets of Prague, Paris, Berlin, and even London".

(. . .)

"That the 'peace terms' signed by Chamberlain are such that they strike a mortal blow at the interests and security of the British people".

(. . .)

"The leaders of the British Labour Movement have to bear a great measure of responsibility for the sully of British honour. For they who had the power to mobilise a tremendous public opinion, powerful enough to compel Chamberlain to have stood resolutely by France, Russia and Czechoslovakia, fell into the trap of assuming that Chamberlain was intent upon making a stand against Hitler, when actually he had no such intention".

(. . .)

"There must be no further confidence in Chamberlain. Labour must stand firm in Parliament to-day and give a lead which will rally all the truly patriotic and progressive forces in Parliament against the shameful Munich betrayal".

Two days later the Secretariat of the Communist Party repudiated the article. But they probably did so because it was too outspoken a statement of the logic of their position—that Britain and France should take a strong line against Hitler. That this would in all probability have led to war is shown by Russia's war preparations and Litvinov's explicit statement that Russia was prepared to join Britain and France in going to war in aid of Czechoslovakia if it were attacked.

It must be clear to anyone not blinded by prejudice that the Editor of the *Daily Worker* (who presumably was familiar with the attitude of the Party of which he was an official spokesman) based his article on Communist policy.

The Communist Party, like the Labour Party, has completely changed its attitude on Czechoslovakia. It has gone even further in its change of front. Consider its present insistence on Britain rallying to the support of Czechoslovakia and resisting the march of "reactionary Fascism", and then examine the following quotation from *The Struggle against War, and the Tasks of the Communists*, a 6d pamphlet issued by the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1928:

"In the last imperialist war the Allies made use of the slogan 'Fight against Prussian Militarism', while the Central Powers used the slogan 'Fight against Czarism'; both sides using the respective slogans to mobilise the masses for the war. In a future war between Italy and France, or Yugoslavia, the same purpose will be served by the slogan 'Fight against reactionary Fascism', for the bourgeoisie in the latter countries will take advantage of the anti-Fascist sentiments of the masses to justify an imperialist war" (page 14).

“In Czechoslovakia and in the Balkan countries, in Italy, in France, Spain, Belgium and Great Britain (Ireland) there are also oppressed nationalities. The Communist Parties must support the liberation movement of the oppressed nations and national minorities *in all these countries*, lead them in the revolutionary struggle against imperialism and unreservedly champion their right to self-determination, which must include the right to complete separation” (page 31. Italics in the pamphlet).

It is doubtful if anyone but the Communist Party could make such a blatant and complete somersault in policy. Possibly the greatest joke of the whole tragic business, though it might have been a tragic one, is the spectacle of the Communist Party urging the British and French workers to be ready to lay down their lives in defence of democracy—and “bourgeois” democracy at that!

One thing at least can be said. Chamberlain’s actions were consistent, in line with his views on Czech dismemberment and his desire for unity with European Powers. But the attitude of the Labour and Communist Parties is a complete reversal of their former views. They held previously that Czechoslovakia should be allowed to be split up—in the name of “Justice” and “Liberty”. Now they want it to remain intact in the name of the same deities.

The reversal of policy by the latter two parties, just as much as the tricky diplomacy of the Chamberlain group, should be a warning to workers not to be misled by high-sounding phrases, but to look behind these phrases. Base their attitude on their class interest alone and they will not be led into the support of groups or parties that pursue a policy which obscures the fundamental antagonism of interest between worker and capitalist, of all races, colours and creeds.

The attitude of the Labour Party, the Communist Party, and others of like views, relating to the position of the Czechs, is due partly to fright, which has developed an acute attack of anti-Fascism. They are prepared to see cities littered with the corpses of hundreds of thousands of working men, women and children, for what? To prevent what would be in the main merely a change of rulers.

While the workers of the world are prepared to put up with capitalism, and all that capitalism means, a change of rule is a minor question. Certainly not worth a war which would put back the movement for Socialism amongst both victors and vanquished. The present position of Germany, Austria and Italy is a striking illustration of this fact.

In conclusion, we must stress the fact that the only attitude for the workers to adopt, if they would free themselves from the horrors of both war and peace, is to organise together for the purpose of establishing a system of society in which the wealth of the world will be commonly owned by all the people of the world.